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ABSTRACT

Information processing, beliefs, and motivations can be coupled with the principle of causal attributions to provide a framework for assessing the causes to which individuals attribute their own behavior. For example, an elderly man who forgets to buy something at the store presents himself with an identity based on cultural stereotypes--in this case, that aged persons forget--because he attributes the causes of his behavior to internal states or dispositions and in turn believes his disposition to cause certain behaviors (forgetting). Coupling such self-attribution with altercasting (the casting of the other member of an interaction into particular identities or roles), it is posited that the aged engage in self-attributions based on cultural stereotypes or myths about themselves and cast others with whom they interact into roles that demand consensus of the attribution in order for the interaction to continue. If an elderly person perceives himself or herself as being forgetful, that person will accept having the characteristic of forgetfulness and will attempt to have others accept such an attribution as well. Research from this perspective can be used to account for why American society views the aged as it does and why cultural stereotypes about the aged persist. (RL)

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Attribution and Altercasting:

An Argument for Application in Communication Research with the Aged

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Attribution and Altercasting:

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Questions concerning the characteristics of the aged will be posed with greater importance as the aged constitute an increasing portion of the American population. In particular, why are the aged viewed as incompetent, incapacitated, forgetful, talkative, bossy, etc.? One answer is cultural stereotyping. A related question concerns why these stereotypes persist in light of contradictory evidence. The answer lies in an analysis of day-to-day interactions with the aged, and the current reliance on labeling theory to explain the ways in which behaviors get socially defined. We come to know who we are through interaction. In this case, the aged come to know their social identity through interaction--an interaction frequently based on preconceived roles regarding the aged.

Another, less obvious, response to the two questions is: the aged engage in self-attribution of incompetence, incapacity, and forgetfulness based on cultural stereotypes; and in interaction, the aged provide the other with limited role (identity) possibilities. If interaction is to be successful (ongoing), a 'working agreement' as to identities must be negotiated (McCall and Simmons, 1978). The aged present an identity of incompetence and offer the other an identity in which the other must view the aged as incompetent for ongoing interaction to occur. Research in attribution and altercasting provides a framework for developing the importance of self-attribution and presentation of self in interaction as a basis for analysis of communication with the aged.

Attribution Theory

Initial research on attribution focuses on person perception and accuracy in judging others (see Brunner and Tagiuri, 1954; and Tagiuri, 1969). Most of the person perception research focuses on the product (accuracy in inferences about causes of behavior) rather than the process by which individuals make attributions. Consequently, later research focuses on how and why individuals make inferences about the causes of their own as well as others' behaviors. The general principle guiding later attribution research is the individual's ability to distinguish between the perception of internal causes and external causes of behavior (Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965; and Kelley, 1972). "According to this principle, behavior is seen either as caused by forces in the situation surrounding the actor (external and situational) or as caused by the actor's personal qualities or dispositions (internal)" (Wegner and Vallacher, 1977: 43).

Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, and Weiner (1972) note that attribution theory "grows out of a number of converging lines of inquiry in social psychology" (p. x). Three basic lines of inquiry exist: 1) an individual infers causes for his own behavior as well as others, seeking information which enables him to do so; 2) an individual's determination of cause(s) is based on systematic beliefs; and 3) an individual assigns causes of behavior based on consequences. Thus, much of attribution research focuses on antecedents of attributions: information processing, beliefs, and motivation. For extensive reviews of attribution literature see Jones et al. (1972); Harvey, Ickes, and Kidd (1976 and 1978); and Kelley and Michela (1980).

Information Processing

Potential causes of a behavior include the individual himself, the person

or thing he is behaving toward, and the situation in which the behavior occurs (Kelley, 1967). Sources of information for determining the causes of behavior are consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. Kelley's ANOVA model of covariation (1967) combines these factors to determine the perception of cause and effect in attribution. "The covariation principle specifies an information processing rule but is open ended with respect to the types of causes and effects involved (in attribution)" (Kelley and Michela, 1980: 462). The information processing rule is: an individual's response to a certain stimulus in a given situation depends on the individual's perception of the degree of its concensus with other individuals' responses to the stimulus; an individual's consistency in responding to the stimulus; and the distinctiveness of the individual's response to the stimulus from his responses to other stimuli. McArthur (1972) supports the implication of the rule which is that certain patterns of information lead to certain attributions. Jones and Nisbett (1972) note that perceptions of certain patterns of information which lead to certain attributions differ for the actor and the observer. They argue "that there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions" (Jones and Nisbett, 1972: 80).

To exemplify this review, imagine an interaction between an aged person and an adolescent. The aged person is complaining to the adolescent that he always throws his newspaper in the bushes. In order for an observer to attribute causes for behavior, he must have information regarding one of the following: 1) both the aged person's and the adolescent's perceptions of the event (consensus); 2) the aged person always complaining to the adolescent, and the adolescent always throwing the newspaper in the bushes (consistency); and 3) whether or not the aged person complains to others, and whether or not

the adolescent throws others' newspapers in the bushes (distinctiveness). Extending the example: the aged person is the actor and the adolescent is the observer. The aged person perceives the causes of his behavior (complaining) to be induced by the adolescent throwing his newspaper in the bushes for the tenth time in two weeks and never missing his neighbor's porch (external and situational). The adolescent perceives the causes of the aged person's behavior to be typical grouchiness due to his age (internal and dispositional). Of course, the example can be further delineated to include the adolescent-as-actor and the aged person-as-observer, or the aged person and the adolescent becoming both actor and observer in the interaction.

Beliefs

If consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness as sources of information are not available for determining the causes of behavior, an individual will rely on normative social rules for attribution (Jones, Davis, and Gergen, 1961; and Jones and Davis, 1965). An observer has expectations about actors as well as expectations about behaviors in situations. In other words, individuals have beliefs about causes and effects of behavior which they call upon in the absence of information to make attributions. "Given a certain effect, there are suppositions about its causes; given a certain cause, there are expectations about its effect" (Kelley and Michela, 1980: 468). Support for this claim is research on the attributions of success and failure.

Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, and Rosenbaum (1971) postulate that individuals utilize four causal elements in making attributions about success and failure: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (p. 96). These four elements combined with the dimensions of stable-unstable and internal-external from locus of control research (see Rotter, 1966; and Lefcourt, 1966) provide the basis for the following scheme:

	Internal	External
Stable	ability	task difficulty
Unstable	effort	luck

The scheme displays the possible causes for success and failure. Individuals have the tendency to attribute success to stable, internal causes and failure to unstable, external causes. In general, actors and observers attribute success to ability and failure to effort, except in the case of successful females and males. If a male is successful at a given task, the success is attributed to ability. If a female is successful at the same task, the success is often attributed to luck or effort (see Deaux, 1976).

Research on the attribution of failure to the aged (e.g. forgetting) might well prove similar to research on successful males and females, i.e., aged persons forget due to stable or unstable, internal causes--ability or effort.

Motivation

Closely linked to research on attributions of success and failure is research on motivation to make attributions (see Miller and Ross, 1975; and Zuckerman, 1979). An individual is motivated to preserve face or have a positive presentation of self to other in interaction (Goffman, 1959). Self-attributions are integral to interaction with others. The face presented often determines the outcome of the interaction. What motivates an individual to present certain self-attributions in interaction is difficult to answer. Little, conclusive evidence is available for this phenomenon in attribution research. Motivation is an internal state, and conditions under which an individual is motivated to present a certain face (self-attributions) are

difficult to manipulate. However, research interpreted post hoc by Zuckerman (1979) indicates that motivation for positive face presentation can be reversed, especially in reference to attributions of success and failure: individuals attribute success to external factors and failure to internal factors. This interpretation coupled with research on individual differences and internal versus external locus of control or attributions of success and failure provides an intriguing line of inquiry for research on communication with the aged: the aged attribute failure (forgetfulness) to internal factors (ability to remember). Consider another example to aid this review.

Ed (age 70) lives with his son, Bill, and Bill's family. For years, Ed has walked to the local newsstand to buy the evening paper. Periodically, he is asked to purchase other items while on his daily walk. During the past year, he has occasionally forgot to buy one of the requested items. Today, Ed bought the requested items, but forgot to buy the newspaper because he became involved in a lengthy discussion outside the market with an old friend and co-worker about the plight of the prevailing wage law. Ed had no idea he forgot the evening paper until Bill asked him where it was. The effect is that Ed forgot the newspaper. Suppositions or beliefs about forgetting the newspaper could be that he was too busy or had too many other things on his mind--typical beliefs about why individuals forget. In other words, attributions for failure (forgetting) could be made to external, unstable causes. On the other hand, Ed's failure to purchase the newspaper could be viewed as a stable, internal cause: Ed's getting old and simply cannot remember things anymore. This example will be extended later in the paper.

Thus far, the general review of attribution literature examines antecedents to attribution: information processing, beliefs, and motivation. These antecedents in conjunction with the principle of causal attributions as

internal or external provide a framework for assessing how individuals attribute the causes of their own behavior.

Self-Attribution

Nisbett and Valins (1972) review attribution literature relevant to Bem's proposition that individuals infer their beliefs from their behavior (1967). They state:

> People seem to infer their beliefs from their behavior only when they have good reason to believe that their behavior toward a stimulus is produced primarily by their feelings about the stimulus. When people had reason to believe that their behavior was produced in large part by circumstantial factors extrinsic to the stimulus. . . a belief inference did not take place (p. 66).

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic is not the same as the distinction between internal and external attribution. Intrinsic and extrinsic are in reference to the stimuli. The distinction concerns causal factors intrinsic to the stimuli and causal factors extrinsic to the stimuli. The later distinction "is concerned with the allocation of cause between various aspects of the environment" (Nisbett and Valins, 1972: 67). Nisbett and Valins extend this information processing view about perception of one's behavior to include belief inferences based on an individual's feelings toward a stimulus, plus an individual's perception that his behavior toward a stimulus is elicited by his intrinsic reaction to the stimulus.

Bem's work on self-perception as elaborated in Nisbett and Valins is useful for the argument here. Implications are that an actor can and will accept his behavior as dispostional (internal) rather than situational (external) based on his belief about certain stimuli. This is most apparent in learned helplessness research. "In learned helplessness the important variable is not the occurrence of the aversive event, but the perception of the

relationship between one's behavior and the occurrence of that event" (Dweck, 1975: 675). If an actor perceives himself to be a failure, regardless of the event (stimuli), he will continue to believe he is a failure. An actor will attribute internal causation for failure based on his perception/beliefs about the intrinsic nature of the stimuli (see Dweck and Reppucci, 1973). How might Ed perceive himself forgetting to purchase the newspaper?

Suppose Ed consistently perceives forgetting as an aversive event or failure. He attributes his failure to remember to a dispositional state (old age). After repeated occurrences of forgetting, he not only views his behavior as a direct result of old age, but he views forgetting as an intrinsic reaction to an event. Ed might well declare, "I forgot the newspaper because I am old; and because I am old, I will continue to forget to purchase the newspaper." As a consequent of this pattern of attribution, Ed presents an identity of failure. As stated in the introduction, Ed presents an identity based on cultural stereotypes (in this case, aged persons forget) because he attributes the causes of his behavior to internal states or disposition and in turn, believes his disposition to cause certain behaviors.

Altercasting

The previous discussion of attributions of success and failure, perceiving the causes of one's own behavior, and the presentation of self in interaction is linked to the notion of altercasting. Altercasting, as defined by Weinstein and Deutschberger (1970), is the casting of the other into particular identities or roles. Their alternative view to identity negotiation is based predominately on the work of Goffman (1959). Remember that Goffman is concerned with the presentation of self in relationship to achieving a positive identity or face in interaction, and that presentation of self is goal-directed.

Also remember that some attribution research and learned helplessness research indicates an actor can and will present a "negative" identity if he attributes causes internally, and in turn, if he perceives his disposition to cause behavior. Weinstein and Deutschberger label the actor as Ego and the other as Alter. They state:

> In Goffman's analysis, the focus of the problem of influencing Alter's definition of the situation is Ego's presentation of himself. If Ego successfully presents the correct identity, Alter, in his responsive lines of action, will be obligated to deal with Ego as persons with such an identity have a right to expect (p. 328).

Ego presents his identity based on his perception of the situation and influences alter's definition of the situation through the presented identity. Again, consider Ed forgetting to purchase the newspaper.

Ed perceives forgetting the newspaper as a result of his old age; and 'aged persons readily forget'. When his son, Bill, inquires as to where the evening newspaper is, Ed presents the following face:

> Ed: I forgot again, son. I'm sorry. I guess the old noggin' isn't as good as it used to be.
>
> Bill: That's O.K., Dad.
>
> Ed: No. You know when I was your age, I could remember everything. I could even remember your Mother's and my anniversary--bless her soul. I'm just not able to keep everything straight anymore. Why I even forgot Joe's name when I saw him at the market today. He's younger than I am. He doesn't forget yet.

At this point, Bill has three options available to him for continuence of the interaction: 1) he can accept Ed's identity (forgetful and incompetent), and accept the identity offered by Ed to view him as such in regard to the situation; 2) he can reject the identity he is offered in regard to the situation and change the topic, thus presenting his own identity and offering Ed a different identity; and 3) he can terminate the interaction. If the interaction

is to be successful or ongoing, Bill and Ed must negotiate identities using either option 1 or 2. The interaction could continue in this manner using option 1:

> Bill: Yeah, Dad, I know. I haven't forgotten an anniversary yet, but I imagine if I live to be your age, I will. Mary would probably understand because I bet she wouldn't remember either--if she lives that long.

The interaction could also continue using option 2:

> Bill: How is Joe? I haven't seen him since you two decided to go to the union meeting three months ago.
>
> Ed: Joe's fine. We had a talk about the prevailing wage law today. I wonder what Reagan's got up his sleeve?
>
> or
>
> Bill: How is Joe? I haven't seen him since you two decided to go to a union meeting three months ago.
>
> Ed: Three months? Has it been that long? I can't even remember when or where I do things anymore. I can't remember when I see my friends. I can't even remember to buy a newspaper. Growing old and getting to retire may give me more time for friends like Joe, but what good is it if I can't remember?

The identity offered by Bill to Ed can be accepted or rejected.

As shown, the interaction will be ongoing if Bill accepts Ed's identity and offered identity in option 1; if Ed accepts Bill's identity and offered identity in option 2; or if this example were continued, Bill accepts Ed's rejection of Bill's identity-offer and Bill continues to view Ed as incompetent and forgetful in option 2.

Even though the examples are fictitious, they ground the argument that the aged engage in self-attributions based on cultural stereotypes or myths and cast others in interaction into roles which demand consensus of the attribution in order for interaction to be ongoing.

Attribution theory and altercasting provide other, perhaps more insightful, assumptions which account for why American society views the aged as it does, and why cultural stereotypes or myths about the aged persist. This paper argues that approaching communication with the aged from an attribution and altercasting perspective would be more beneficial for determining negotiation of social identities in interaction. Certainly, the assumptions presented in the paper need to be grounded in an empirical domain to have any validity in the 'real' world.

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